

INFO LOG-00 AF-00 AID-00 AMAD-00 CIAE-00 INL-00 DODE-00
PDI-00 DS-00 DHSE-00 UTED-00 VCI-00 FOE-00 H-00
TEDE-00 INR-00 LAB-01 L-00 MFLO-00 MOFM-00 MOF-00
VCIE-00 NSAE-00 NIMA-00 PER-00 PM-00 DOHS-00 SSO-00
SS-00 FMP-00 R-00 PMB-00 DSCC-00 PRM-00 DRL-00
SAS-00 FA-00 SWCI-00 PESU-00 /001W

R 051625Z NOV 09
FM AMEMBASSY BELMOPAN
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2103
INFO WHA CENTRAL AMERICA COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS BELMOPAN 000407

DEPT FOR WHA/CEN (JENNIFER VANTRUMP)

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BH](#)
SUBJECT: SHAKE UP IN THE PEOPLE'S UNITED PARTY

REF: 2008 BELMOPAN 130

Summary

¶1. John Briceo, leader of the People's United Party (PUP) has recently proposed changes to Senators representing the opposition and to the party's executive committee. The expanded membership has been justified as a measure to bridge the division that has permeated the party since his assumption of leadership in March ¶2008. Others have perceived the move as a counter balance to future ambitions by Mark Espat. End summary.

Background

¶2. The PUP was the driving force behind independence, and has won 10 of the 12 elections since Belize first elected a legislative assembly, under British rule, in 1954. In the last years of the previous PUP administration, the party was rocked by allegations of corruption. Following the party's crushing defeat in the February 2008 general elections, former Prime Minister, Said Musa, and former Minister of Housing and Home Affairs, Ralph Fonseca, announced that they were resigning from their leadership positions. The general elections resulted in a landslide victory for the United Democratic Party (UDP) which won 25 of the 31 contested electoral seats, leaving only 6 seats for the PUP.

Briceo's Rise to Party Leadership

¶3. In March 2008, friction between conflicting personalities and agendas within the PUP came to the fore in a bitter fight for party leadership. On March 30, 2008, John Briceo, the Orange Walk District Representative, emerged as the leader of the PUP through the party convention process. (NOTE: Briceo was an IVLP participant on the theme of "U.S. Elections" in 1996. END NOTE) Briceo's rise represented a significant shift in leadership, which has traditionally been concentrated in the Belize District. The 2008 Convention to determine a party leader reflected a wide division within the party, which remains in place today. Despite allegations that the process was rigged against him, Briceo effectively defeated Francis Fonseca, who was the old guard favorite and is the nephew of Ralph Fonseca. During this time, allegations of theft against the former PM and Minister of Housing and Home Affairs were also beginning to circulate, triggering public outcries (reftel). Despite this, old guard supporters of George Price, Said Musa, Francis Fonseca, Ralph Fonseca, and Godfrey Smith refused to support Briceo, and even threatened to proceed with a legal suit to challenge the Convention results; however, such a suit was not filed.

¶4. Upon assuming party leadership, Briceo was made aware that certain key assets used to advance the PUP's interest were not in

the name of the party, but held by former PUP party leader, Said Musa, and former PUP campaign manager, Ralph Fonseca. These assets include Independence Hall, the building which houses the PUP Headquarters, "The Belize Times" newspaper, and the Positive Vibes radio station. Shortly after assuming leadership of the party, Briceo entered into an agreement to pay Musa and Fonseca for the assets, valued at BZD 850,000 (USD 425,000). In June 2008, a down payment of BZD 100,000 (USD 50,000) was made and payment began. A final payment of BZD 500,000 (USD 250,000) was due in December 2008. The final payment remains outstanding.

Structure of the PUP Executive

15. In March 2008, the new party leader was challenged to undertake assertive action, and to reprimand old guard supporters who challenged him. In some cases this resulted in the expulsion or suspension of Executive Committee members. These vacancies were replaced internally with the following individuals:

Deputy Leaders--Mark Espat, Cordel Hyde, Daniel Silva
National Campaign Manager--Eamon Courtenay
Party Chairperson--Carolyn Trench-Sandiford
Communications Director--Nardia Garcia
Legal Advisor--Anthony Sylvestre
Chairman of Policy and Reform Commission--Anthony Chanona

16. In August 2004, Briceo, Courtenay, Espat, and Hyde formed part of a group of seven PUP minister's (G-7) which challenged Musa's administration. At the time, all four formed part of Musa's Cabinet and sought the removal of Ralph Fonseca as Minister of Finance. Fonseca effectively controlled the administration's finances, and was perceived to be the person primarily responsible for the excessive debt accumulation by the Musa Administration. PM Musa neutralized the power of the G-7 Ministers by lessening or stripping them of their cabinet portfolios, though he also assumed the Finance portfolio from Fonseca, making Fonseca Minister of Home Affairs and Investment (which later changed to Housing and Home Affairs) instead.

Recent Expansion of Party Executive

17. As the party leader, Briceo has stated that he will undertake wider reforms to transform the PUP into a united, accountable, and responsible party. Despite the new leadership, the PUP faced a crushing defeat in the March 2009 municipal elections. The rival UDP won 61 of the 64 contested municipal seats, including all the mayoral positions. Even though Briceo's Orange Walk constituency secured the only three PUP Councilors, he was not able to secure a complete victory in this area. Briceo's defeat at the municipal level has been attributed to the continued split between the new and old party regime, as well as to the continued lack of trust the general public has in the party.

18. In September 2009, Briceo decided to shake up the party one more time. He nominated H.E. Eamon Courtenay and H.E. Lisa Shoman to the Senate to replace Senators Hector Silva and Eiden Salazar. The Senate is composed of 13 members, who are appointed by the Governor-General. These include the President of the Senate, along with 6 senators who are appointed on the advice of the Prime Minister, 3 on the advice of the Leader of Opposition, and 1 each on the advice of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry/Belize Business Bureau, the National Trade Union Congress and Civil Society Steering Committee, and the Belize Council of Churches/Evangelical Association of Churches. Both of the nominated individuals are prominent attorneys and served as Senators, as well as Ministers of Foreign Affairs, under the Musa Administration. Hector Silva has publicly expressed his discontent with Briceo, claiming the decision to remove him from the Senate was made without his prior consultation. Bill Lindo, a political activist known for his public criticisms of government policies with PUP loyalties, also disagreed with Silva's removal. In his view, the removal was motivated by Lord Ashcroft and targeted Senator Silva due to his abstention from voting no on the bill to nationalize Belize Telemedia Limited. No reason was given by Briceo for the abrupt removal and replacement

of the two Senate seats.

¶9. Shortly after the proposed change in Senators and after making a rare public appearance with former PM Musa, Briceo proposed further changes. These changes, which relate to the composition of the PUP's Executive, were approved at a PUP convention on September 27, ¶2009. The most significant change was the expansion of the Party's Executive Committee by creating a post for the Immediate Past Party Leader, Said Musa. Another noteworthy change was the approval of an additional deputy leader, Francis Fonseca. Following the resignation of Anthony Chanona as Chairman of the Policy and Reform Commission, which occurred prior to the change, the position was expanded, and will now be co-chaired by Bill Lindo and Hugh O'Brien.

In addition, the Communications Director will now be assisted by two public relations deputies, Mark Usher and Anthony Mahler. All of these changes took place just before September 29, which marked the 59th Anniversary of the founding of the PUP.

¶10. It is widely speculated that the proposed changes were an attempt by Briceo to appease Musa and Fonseca regarding the outstanding payments for the party assets they hold. This effort proved unsuccessful, however, as on October 16 a letter was delivered to Briceo from the law firm of Musa and Balderamos, informing him that the assets would be repossessed if the payments owed were not received on or before October 30, 2009.

¶11. On October 23 Briceo sought to retaliate by mobilizing the PUP's Northern Caucus constituencies from Orange Walk and Corozal, along with its associate constituency from Belize Rural South. In a press release, the PUP Northern Caucus called upon the Said Musa and Ralph Fonseca to return what they believe are the assets of the party. A meeting of the PUP's National Executive, which now includes Musa, was held on October 24 to discuss a strategy to move forward. At the meeting a compromise was reached, which will allow the assets to be transferred to a trust managed by Party Representatives. The debt has been deferred and will have to be paid for within 5 years.

Comments

¶12. The recent changes in the PUP suggest that Briceo is working to unify the party, and also to ensure that all official representatives of the party tow the party line. It is speculated that Hector Silva and Eiden Salazar's replacement in the Senate may be connected to their recent abstentions in the Senate on the Telecommunications Bill, which the party later opposed in a press release. It was under the previous PUP administration that the Accommodation Agreement with BTL was reached. While their votes would not have stopped the bill from passing, it was reported the two PUP Senators did not vote against the bill to nationalize BTL. The additions of H.E. Courtenay and H.E. Shoman to the Senate may help to consolidate the party, as both are party loyalists who worked under the previous administration. Nevertheless, there has been some limited opposition to the change by some party members, though no public comments regarding the change have been made by the UDP.

¶13. Briceo has justified the changes in the structure of the Executive as an attempt to restore party unity; however, it is likely that Briceo is seeking to forestall any threat to his leadership by appeasing the old guard and countering any ambitions Mark Epat may hold for leadership. While there have been no open attempts to replace Briceo as party leader, the fight for leadership in 2008 was contentious, and his position has not strengthened during his year and a half in office. With the next general elections over three years away, working now to unify the party and win back the public's trust is proving a difficult task, but it could prove a winning long-term strategy for Briceo. End comment.

FEATHERSTONE